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ABSTRACT

This paper describes data from focus groups conducted with elementary teacher mentors at two Professional Development School (PDS) sites. The focus group sessions emphasized four themes: teachers' decisions to get involved in a PDS, teachers' perceived barriers to PDS success, how teachers benefit from PDSs, and recommendations for improvement. Teachers decided to become involved in the PDS for such reasons as: needing help, being mandated by the principal, and believing that children would benefit from the effort. Participants listed many benefits for students, teachers, preservice teachers, parents, and principals, including: lower teacher-student ratios, a positive approach to working out problems, and sharing the needs of students. Respondents named several barriers that inhibited collaboration and inquiry, including: lack of information about the extensiveness of the projects, time factors, and student teachers' skill levels. Some of their recommendations included: remind new mentor teachers of goals for the student teachers, have student teachers participate in lunchroom and playground duties, and describe boundaries to student teachers. Teachers stated that the PDS had met their expectations and they looked forward to participating again. Student teachers also made positive comments about their PDS experiences. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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1

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Professional Development Schools:

Listening to Teachers' and Teacher Candidates' Voices

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Professional Development Schools:
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Early Childhood Educators recognize the importance of early and on-going field experiences for teacher candidates (Baker, 1996; Marshall, 1999), therefore, a partnership was forged between a large metropolitan university in Texas and two suburban elementary schools to provide university students experiences with students in the school setting. Although the PDS provided many positive experiences for all stakeholders (principals, teachers, students, teacher candidates' and parents), there was a strong desire to enhance the experience for all involved. Consequently, focus groups were conducted with teachers at each elementary school to obtain their perceptions and teacher candidates conveyed their perceptions through class discussion and email messages. The focus of this paper is to introduce a brief history of professional development schools and report the results of an action research project conducted after one year of university and school collaboration. The qualitative research was aimed at improving and sustaining two early childhood professional development schools (PDS).

Many people believe that well prepared teaches are the best hope for school reform. Teacher education is an important component of education reform since better prepared teachers result in higher student learning. Therefore, calls for reform in education have exerted pressure to change the system of educating teachers (Association of Teacher Educators, 1986; Cobb, 2001; Goodlad, 1990; Ishler, 1995). The Holmes Group (1986, 1990) and the Carnegie Forum (1986) emphasized that to prepare students for the future, schools, teachers, principals, and colleges of education must change to accommodate

technology and the diversity of the American citizenry. Consequently, professional development schools have been espoused as a remedy for the problems with teacher education (Goodlad, 1990; Marshall, 1999).

The professional development school has its roots from several similar models since the late nineteenth century. Laboratory schools, portal schools, clinical schools, and induction schools are four examples of programs to improve teacher education. First John Dewey established the first Laboratory School at the University of Chicago around the turn of the century. This lab school was aimed at research activities that would improve teaching and give experience to students preparing to teach. The laboratory schools peaked in 1964 and the numbers have dwindled in recent years. Second, the portal school was first described in literature in 1969 as a point of entry of new curriculum and practices to improve learning for students (Stallings and Kowalski, 1990). By 1980, the portal school terminology was not being used. Third, clinical schools were recommended by the Carnegie Forum and are fashioned after the medical model. Fourth, the Rand study recommended the idea of an induction school. The induction school would be heavily staffed and located in inner city neighborhoods (Stallings and Kowlask, 1990). During the 1980s, the term professional development school became widely used to describe a variety of college-school collaborative efforts. The models vary to accommodate the institutions and students they serve which make it difficult to evaluate and substantiate the value of PDS on the education of future teachers and education reform (Cobb, 2001).

The Holmes Group (1986) report used the nomenclature of professional development school. However, current literature may refer to the professional development school with a variety of terms. The professional development school (PDS) may also be referred to as a

professional development center (PDC), as a partner school, as a professional practice school (PPS), or as a center for professional development and technology (CPDT) (Center for Professional Development, 1995; Clark, 1995; Morrison, 1997). Whatever the nomenclature, the cornerstone of the definition and concept of the professional development school is collaboration between school faculty and university faculty to improve the education of students, teacher candidates, teacher education and administrators (CPDT, 1993; Holmes, 1990; Ishler, 1995).

Collaboration between faculties at the university and the elementary school not just cooperation is essential to growth and success of a professional development school. Stirzaker and Splittgerber (1991) identified three major concerns in the development of the PDS program: (a) commitment of the school district and the university, (b) collaboration and shared decision making, and (c) institutionalization of the PDS program. The second of these, collaboration, in large part determines the resolution of the other two concerns. Hence, it appears that the quality of collaboration is of vital importance. It determines the ability of both schools and universities to accept the values, conflicts, failures, lapses in commitment, and most important, the erratic nature of progress toward the ultimate restructuring goal. Whitford, Schlechty, and Shelor (1987) delineated three types or levels of collaboration: cooperative, symbiotic, and organic. Cooperative collaborations are usually a matter of where one party gives and the other receives, with little reciprocation. Symbiotic collaborations are characterized by reciprocity. The call of the Holmes Group (1986) to invent PDS, however, demands for organic collaboration with a new mix of ideas and practices. The PDS movement requires a major restructuring of two institutions. No part of either remains unscathed (David, 1991). Thus, the quality of collaboration with its unique

ability to synthesize the ideas, the practice, and the emotional investment of a diverse group with diverse goals becomes key to the success of PDS programs. Dixon and Ishler (1992) suggested that collaboration is a messy process fraught with social loafing, miscommunication, and divergent commitments. Collaboration is a necessary element of PDSs and appears to give professional development schools the key to success or might lead to the road of failure (Cooper, 1998; Cowart & Rademacher, 1998).

As pointed out by Bland (1996) "the first year of any effort is always the most tenuous, and is rarely the best indicator of the potential of a new program" (p. 16). Consequently, in an effort to improve collaboration at the two early childhood PDS sites, focus groups were conducted with the elementary teachers who were mentors in the program. All the mentor teachers were invited to attend the focus sessions (3 focus sessions were scheduled for each school). A standard procedure was used for each of the focus group discussions. A faculty member served as the facilitator and the questions for discussion were displayed on an overhead and answers/comments were recorded on the overhead transparencies. Approximately 75 percent of the mentor teachers attended one of the focus groups. The data collected clustered around four common themes: teacher's decision to get involved in PDS, teacher's perceived barriers to success of the PDS, teacher's benefits of the PDS, and recommendations for improvement.

Teachers decided to become involved in the PDS project at their elementary schools for several reasons as illustrated by the following quotes:

"To help someone get into the classroom early"

"Peers said it was helpful."

"Mandated by the principal"

"I needed help."

"Children in my class will have extra mentors that will be interested in what they are doing."

"Part of shaping future teaching"

The participants in the focus groups listed many benefits for students, teachers, teacher candidates, parents, and principals. Examples of benefits of the PDS:

"Help with TAAS"

"To provide one on one opportunities for the children"

"A smaller teacher/pupil ratio"

"There is a positive approach to working out problems"

"We are understanding our roles better. We watch and listen and talk with students [teacher candidates] informally"

"It helps them [teacher candidates] to understand that we are real, and they are real."

"Sharing needs of children"

The mentor teachers named the following barriers that inhibited collaboration and inquiry:

"Lack of information about the extensiveness of the projects"

"Am I giving them [teacher candidates] what they need?"

"TIME"

"Skill level of the PDS student [teacher candidate]"

"Questions related to outline/responsibilities"

Based on the benefits and barriers perceived by the teachers, they were asked to make recommendations for improving the PDS for the following year:

"Remind new mentor teachers of goals and growth of the students [teacher candidates]."

"Students should participate in the playground and lunchtime."

"For evaluation [of teacher candidates], know ahead, give a rubric with some kind of guidelines."

"Clear expectations and a check off list with a time line for university activities"

"Describe boundaries to the student [teacher candidate]"

Overall the teachers stated that the professional development school had met their expectations and they looked forward to participating the following year. Some teachers wanted the teacher candidates to spend more time in their room and some teachers wanted the teacher candidates to spend less time. Conclusions from the focus groups indicated different teachers wanted different things from the teacher candidates, teachers were more positive about the PDS when their reason for being part of the program was to mentor future teachers, and communication was a very important aspect of the partnership.

Just as the success of the PDS for the mentor teachers was dependent on the individual teacher, individual students perceived the benefits and barriers of the PDS differently. During two semesters (and divided between the two schools), 44 teacher candidates participated in class discussion and individual email messages regarding their experiences in the PDS. The teacher candidates were assigned an elementary school in a suburban independent school district and a specific mentor teacher. The teacher candidates spent two days a week at the elementary schools where they also attended their corresponding university course in their PDS classroom. Overall, the teacher candidates

expressed positive comments about their experience in the two elementary schools. They felt they learned a great deal from the real-life experience with students and the mentor teachers. The biggest stress that the teacher candidates seemed to face was the incongruence of expectations of the mentor teacher, principal, and the university faculty. (Specific teacher candidate comments are the subject of another paper.) Wadlington, Slaton, and Partridge (1998) suggested "debriefing at the beginning, middle and end of field experiences" (p. 7) to help alleviate stress for teacher candidates

The professional development school shows the great promise. However, its implementation is full of thorns. This is because it tries to tie up reforms in teacher education with reforms in schools; and because it requires collaboration between schools and universities. It seems that the success of professional development schools is dependent on ongoing dialogue and continuous listening to teacher and teacher candidates' voices. In concluding, the following quotation from Sid W. Richardson Foundation Forum (1991) summarizes the dilemma delineated:

"The Professional Development School is much more than a collection of people in a set of buildings. It entails an attitude, a perspective, a professional predisposition that releases educators to share what they know and to improve the teaching of students and the preparation of educators".

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